Absurdity and Imagination in a Time of Upheaval

Presidential Address – ITMS Seventeenth General Meeting
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By **David Golemboski**

A New Plague

Our gathering this year, for the Seventeenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, was unusual. Rather than sharing meals, conversation and time together on the campus of St. Mary's College in South Bend, as we had planned, we instead connected virtually. The series of plenary speakers, paper presentations, workshops and prayer sessions was so enriching, and went off so smoothly, that it is difficult to find much fault with this 2021 conference. And when the history of the COVID-19 pandemic is written, the move to an online ITMS meeting will hardly rank as a serious tragedy. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to be aware, constantly, of the shadow that this pandemic casts on all of our lives in this moment in history.

Like many others, the emergence of COVID-19 as a global pandemic with dramatic consequences for public policy and daily life brought me back to a classic piece of writing about public health – or, rather, public illness: Albert Camus's novel *The Plague*.[1] The book imagines a mysterious and deadly disease overtaking a city in French Algeria. The city shuts down and the various characters respond to their dire situation in distinct ways. *The Plague* was originally published in 1947, but it became a sudden best-seller once again in 2020.[2]

Thomas Merton read *The Plague* and was quite familiar with Camus, more generally. Though he challenged and resisted certain elements of Camus's philosophy, Merton held a great deal of admiration for Camus. Among other things, it is Camus whom Merton quotes at the beginning of Part Two of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, attributing to him this version of a famous aphorism: "*An oriental wise man always used to ask the Divinity in his prayers to be so kind as to spare him from living in an interesting era. As we are not wise, the Divinity has not spared us, and we are living in an interesting era*."[3] (Tell me about it, one is tempted to say.)

Camus, of course, is best-known as the most famous philosopher of the *absurd*, and *The Plague* is an examination of the various ways that people respond to that absurdity in their lives. If you are familiar with Camus's understanding of absurdity, you likely associate it with the myth of Sisyphus: the Greek figure sentenced tragically to push a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll back down

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– over and over, unendingly.[4] *The Plague* offers a more developed, more complex presentation of absurdity. Whereas the myth of Sisyphus can seem to recommend an attitude of resignation (perhaps a rather depressing one), *The Plague* actually affirms and validates certain positive responses to absurdity – especially in "an interesting era."

Merton wrote at length about *The Plague*; a couple of essays about the book are published in the volume of *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*.[5] I want here to explore a few of Merton's reflections on Camus in light of our collective experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, because his comments both shed illuminating light on what we have been through and also offer wisdom for how we might claim some agency in responding to and moving forward from our contemporary time of plague.

I invite you to recollect for a moment some of the bizarre, surreal and downright absurd scenes that we have witnessed over the past year. Some have tended toward the quaint or amusing:

- Sports teams competing in empty stadiums, seats occupied only by cardboard cut-outs, with fake crowd noises piped in through speakers;
- Congregations of religious worshipers attending services in their parked cars, pastors broadcasting their sermons over short-range radio transmitters;
- Runs on baking supplies, inflatable pools and home hair-cutting devices as people scrambled to fill their time and meet their basic needs without leaving the house.

Others have been simply bizarre, for instance:

- The President of the United States suggesting from the White House Briefing Room, with outrageous recklessness, that perhaps COVID patients should be injected with bleach as a form of "cleaning."

Other memories of this past year are more distinctly tragic:

- Students – from kindergarten through college – missing out on months or even an entire year of in-person learning with their teachers and classmates, instead struggling to learn from their dining rooms or dorm rooms;
- Families "visiting" their parents and grandparents through nursing home windows, and in some cases saying their final goodbyes over Facetime, rather than in person;
- Crematories in New York City working 24/7 while refrigerated trucks filled up with body bags after overrunning the city's morgues.

These are heartbreaking images that I'm sure many of us in comfortable first-world settings could not have fathomed prior to March 2020. Yet each of us in this community of the ITMS – a vibrant and wide-reaching family of ministers, teachers, intellectuals, workers, artists and seekers – now has our own catalog of personal pandemic absurdities. For my part, in February of this year, my grandmother died at 88 years old. This was mostly an occasion for gratitude: she was very healthy for almost all of her life, and she did not die of COVID. Nevertheless, because of COVID concerns, only a few family members were able to be present in her final days and then to attend her funeral. Aside from my parents, there has been no more enduring formative and caring figure in my life than this grandmother. If you had told me two years ago that on the day of her funeral, I would be a thousand miles away, going about my business entirely removed from that event, I would have insisted that surely you were describing some alternate, impossible reality, some dismal absurdity. We each have our own version of these stories. The past year and a half have put each of us in situations that, beyond the inconvenience and practical disruption of the COVID-times, verge

on surreality and even absurdity.

At a deeper level, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a more fundamental absurdity in the basic reality of human life. This deadly virus sweeping the globe has reminded each of us (or, I will say, *should* have reminded us) of the fragility of our existence on the planet. The ever-present reality of death was, for Camus, a critical fact. The plague of his novel – just like our current pandemic – presents what contemporary pop-philosopher Alain de Botton calls "concentrations of a universal precondition, dramatic instances of a perpetual rule: that all human beings are vulnerable to being randomly exterminated at any time, by a virus, an accident or the actions of our fellow man."[6] This utter vulnerability, and the knowledge that death may come for us at any moment, is the fundamental absurdity of our lives. As Merton put it, the experience of the plague highlights "the radical *absurdity* of an existence into which evil or irrationality can always break without warning" (*LE* 191).

Of course, we have no shortage of philosophical and religious work-arounds to the problem of death. We construct countless doctrines, cosmologies and mythologies to help reconcile ourselves to death, and to give some sense of meaning to that inevitability. In *The Plague*, Camus presents the character of a Jesuit priest who tries to explain the disease as a punishment from God, or as a divine call to repentance. After observing the death of a child, however, the priest is forced to admit that he simply cannot comprehend the logic of this tragedy. As Merton writes, "Camus will not play around with any 'explanation' that evades or minimizes the seemingly utter finality of death" (*LE* 240).

Merton describes the plague of Camus's novel as having an unveiling effect. Prior to its arrival, the people of the town rest complacent in the social order which leaves them "prosperous, comfortable, secure" (*LE* 242), confident that there is some rationality to it all. They have sought meaning and consolation in external sources of validation. They have invested their lives in living up to the customs and conventions of their time and place – some source of stability against the absurdity of life. Their lives are driven, as the anthropologist Ernest Becker would have said, by the denial of death.[7] They assume – they insist – that there is some objective meaning to their world, even if they have no idea what it might be (see *LE* 192). Paradoxically, Merton notes, these social orders seem to reflect "an unconscious death wish," insofar as they are "built on the death of the nonconformist, the alien, the odd ball, the enemy, the criminal" (*LE* 198). Much like those who insist that the only way to preserve "our way of life" is to shut out migrants and refugees who are seeking shelter under our roof, or that the only way to keep our communities safe is to lock up in prisons those we deem "undesirable," our strenuous efforts to secure ourselves against death counter-intuitively turn us ourselves into *agents* of death. The disease, however, reveals the shallowness and futility of it all. These systems, conventions and buffers against meaninglessness are anchored not in solid ground but in sand, in sources of meaning which will themselves be swept away.

The insight given by Camus's *Plague*, then, and also by the plague of our time, is that we cannot be certain that our lives will bear meaning in externally verifiable ways. Death may come for us at any moment, and all our strivings, ambitions and achievements may amount to the equivalent of Sisyphus's boulder, rolling right back down the mountain. This is the absurdity of human existence. The pandemic experience of the past year and a half has disrupted and unsettled us not only because of all the many practical inconveniences, nor simply because of the naked tragedy of millions of deaths worldwide. Rather, the COVID pandemic has laid bare to all of us, in new ways, the utter

fragility of our lives as well as the inadequacy of our defenses.

It might seem that the only response is to give up. If life is fleeting and our socially constructed sources of meaning will also fall away, then what is the point of going on? Where is hope to be found? Camus, however, was not an advocate of surrender. Indeed, his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* is a condemnation of suicide: he rejects it as yet another attempt to impose some schema of rationality onto the absurdity of life. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Camus said instead that he wanted in his writing to show readers "how to forge for themselves *an art of living* in times of catastrophe."[8] Merton writes that the first step in a response to absurdity is "the affirmation that though the reasons which are supposed to justify existence do not, in fact, justify anything at all," one "will go on living anyway" (*LE* 198). The encounter with the absurd, then, is not a dead end. It is, rather, an opening to new things. Merton says, "The confrontation with the absurd, and the ability to be undistractedly, unflinchingly aware of it, is not final. It is purely provisional, it is only a beginning. . . . It is a clearing of the ground for something else" (*LE* 244). What is this "something else," though? In short, it is the possibility of love.

Merton points to two important characters in *The Plague*: Dr. Bernard Rieux, the book's narrator, and Jean Tarrou, a vacationer in the plague-stricken town and the character with whom Camus himself seems to have most identified. Even as people succumb left and right to the disease, Dr. Rieux continues to treat patients, and Tarrou forms "sanitary squads" to fight the disease. They both place their lives at risk, and Tarrou in fact becomes the final victim of the disease. These figures took on work that was, Merton writes, "just as dogged, in many ways just as absurd, as that of Sisyphus. There are moments when their exhausting and dangerous struggle seems utterly hopeless: but they continue anyway, not in order to prove themselves better than the Plague, but simply because they are alive and they want to help others stay alive also" (*LE* 195). They gave of themselves in love of others, not because they were dependent on "the hope of results" (to quote Merton's famous letter to James Forest),[9] but because having confronted the absurdity of life, their only hope of making meaning for themselves was to choose to affirm the value of life – not only in themselves, but in others as well. This revolution of love is the only way, Merton writes, to create a kind of logic in the face of absurdity. "One must . . . make every effort to build a new order of love to supersede the false order which, for all its ideology of humanitarian love or of supernatural grace, is in fact a justification for murder and for hate" (*LE* 199).

What this means is that the disruption wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity for new things, for building new ways of living and of loving. We have all adapted to new forms of relationship with our families and closest loved ones. For those people with whom we cannot share physical space, we have developed new ways of connecting. For those partners, parents or children who, suddenly last March, were *always around*, we have developed new ways of distancing. We have become experts at Zoom, have re-engaged our outdoor spaces, and people of all ages can now be found exchanging fist-bumps in place of handshakes.

The International Thomas Merton Society has adapted too – and this present conference is only one example. Additionally, the always-active Chicago chapter has hosted an impressive series of speakers via Zoom. The St. Louis chapter has continued to hold its book discussion series via Zoom. Doug Hertler, Judith Valente, Brother Paul Quenon and Jonathan Montaldo, in conjunction with Mepkin Abbey, organized an online retreat to celebrate Merton's 106th birthday this past

January. The Argentina chapter is planning their second Argentine Merton Conference for a virtual format this September. Perhaps most noteworthy, the Board of Directors, last summer, initiated the Tuesdays with Merton online lecture series, planned and executed with great success by Theresa Sandok, Alan Kolp and Dan Horan.

Do these initiatives or programs amount to building "a new order of love"? Perhaps not quite. But they are signs of creative imagination, which is essential to making anything new. In the essay that closes the collection entitled *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton describes imagination as "a discovering faculty, a faculty for seeing relationships, for seeing meanings that are special and even quite new. The imagination," he writes, "is something which enables us to discover unique present meaning in a given moment of our life."[10] By imagining – and embracing – new ways of being together, we discover new meaning in this given moment. Imagination is a sign of life, of our choosing to keep on living and loving one another and loving the world.

I should be clear that I don't mean to neglect or to minimize the difficulty of this choice. The tragedy of the COVID pandemic has been immense, and the confrontation with absurdity it invites can be paralyzing. Many of us long not for anything "new," but for the old comforts of which we have been deprived. This is natural, and good. But however we emerge from this pandemic and settle gradually into whatever our "new normal" is to be, there will inevitably be awkwardness, discomfort and conflict along the way. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton describes the human community as a "Body of broken bones," and notes that there is a certain "pain of reunion" involved in resetting our fractured bonds.[11] Perhaps, though, this moment in history offers us a gift: an opportunity to embrace the discomfort of newness, to lean into the uncertainty of transformation. In the essay in *Contemplation in a World of Action* quoted above, Merton writes about the priority of renewal in the contemplative life: "Our new life will emerge from authenticity *now*. This is not merely an empty moment of transition. We are not in an interval of dynamic reconstruction in which we are simply going to put back together again a static life in which we will rest. Our rest is in the reconstruction itself. Transition is also fullness" (*CWA* 339). To put it another way, as St. Catherine of Siena is often quoted, "all the way to heaven is heaven."[12]

It is my hope, then, that if there is good to be found in the suffering and estrangement that the past year has imposed on us, it is that it might provoke an occasion for newness, an opportunity for us to look at our lives and our world anew. Merton wrote at the end of one essay on *The Plague* that "Man's destiny is in his own hands, and everything depends on whether he chooses life and creativity or death and destruction" (*LE* 217). My prayer is that we might revolt against the absurdity of our situation as finite, vulnerable creatures by daring to imagine what Marie Dennis in her plenary speech at this conference called "a civilization of love," and that we might build toward that new order of love, both in our individual lives, and together as this community, the International Thomas Merton Society.

1. Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).
2. See Alison Flood, "Publishers Report Sales Boom in Novels about Fictional Epidemics," *The Guardian* (5 March 2020); available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/05/publishers-report-sales-boom-in-novels-about-fictional-epidemics-camus-the-plague-dean-koontz (accessed 10 August 2021).
3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 51.
4. See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Knopf, 1955).
5. Thomas Merton, "The Plague of Camus: A Commentary and Introduction" (originally published as a pamphlet: New

York: Seabury, 1968) and "Camus: Journals of the Plague Years" in Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 181-217, 218-31; subsequent references will be cited as "*LE*" parenthetically in the text.

6. Alain de Botton, "Camus on the Coronavirus," *New York Times* (19 March 2020); available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-camus-plague.html (accessed 10 August 2021).
7. See Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).
8. Albert Camus, "Banquet Speech" (10 December 1957); available at: https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1957/camus/speech/ (accessed 10 August 2021). Merton quotes from the speech with slight alteration (replacing "forge for themselves" with "fashion") (*LE* 186).
9. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 294.
10. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 345; subsequent references will be cited as "*CWA*" parenthetically in the text.
11. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 72.
12. Dorothy Day was especially fond of this line. See, e.g., Dorothy Day, *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2010) 365.